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AUTHOR Benjamin, Robert L.
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ABSTRACT

Natural language does not lend itself well to discussing metaphysical concepts. It has certain expectations based on internalized rules of sense, reference, and predication that make it difficult if not impossible for laypeople or even ecclesiastical authorities to discuss God and theological concepts with others. Though metaphysics has survived centuries of selfish materialism and is available even now to all who seek it, its message is diffused, not enhanced, by modern language. The metaphysical message leaps the chasms of our kaleidoscopic system and reaches the listener in spite of language, not because of it. A metalanguage to permit discussion and clarity of metaphysical concepts is needed. Such a language need not involve a gigantic vocabulary, but a new syntax is crucial. This would permit us to discuss a subject matter that lies at the root of being and allow us to share the flash of insight that sometimes fills our being. (TJ)

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Robert L. Benjamin
Speech Communication Department
San Diego State University
San Diego, California 92182

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METAPHYSICAL COMMUNICATION AMONG DENOMINATIONS:

THE LANGUAGE COMPONENT

VI BIENNIAL INTERNATIONAL COLLOQUIUM

ON VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Schloss Hernstein

Berndorf, Austria

June, 1978

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When I was quite young I fell into a dispute with some Jewish boys with whom I played regularly. They circled me, pointed accusingly and cried, "Goyim! Goyim!," provoking my instant and heated denial. Many times since I have wondered what my thoughts might be had I later learned that "Goyim" meant "Church-goer" or "clever person" or "fine fellow." My very human reaction--judging truth before meaning--is not confined to children. So strong is the urge to affirm or deny before we understand, only the most virtuous of philosophers can resist it entirely. And it is not difficult to understand why. Arguments over truth or falsity are fun. Meaning--especially linguistic meaning--is hard work. And yet it is meaning that we find at the roots of much heated (and often needless) controversy. And where a point of metaphysics is in contention--as is often the case with communication between denominations--the probability of a meaning-centered dispute is even higher.

Conflict and misunderstanding between and among religious denominations has been widely noted in the United States and abroad. Attempts to explain (and ultimately reduce) such conflict have been more speculative than scientific. Within the various religious denominations there is general recognition that some of these problems are verbal rather than real; but one notes some disagreement as to which is which. The typical Christian denomination is aware of three facets of communication within its purview: (1) official sectarian promulgation (here language is almost totally inflexible, often fixed word-for word by official doctrine); (2) high-level dialog (in which authorized and learned clerics compare views with comparable spokesmen from other

denominations); and (3) impromptu discussions among lay members and their Christian and non-Christian counterparts.

Even a casual analysis reveals that, of the three facets, the last is the least structured and least controlled. Religious discussions may pop up anywhere without warning; and lay representatives of a given denomination are expected to deliver accurate and intelligible answers to complex metaphysical and sectarian questions. (Example: "Do you _____'s believe in the Immaculate Conception?") Traditional variables of source credibility, channel, and message design are almost totally uncontrolled. And yet, paradoxically, much of the uneducated lay opinion about a given denomination derives from just such impromptu dialog.

The importance of discussion among the laity is well known in most sectarian circles. Internal communication aimed at equipping the layman for dialog with "outsiders" is generally in accordance with sound current theory; but is mostly too innocuous to be of much help. Here are some typical instructions from official pamphlets:

> "Talk in a language they can understand."
>
> "Leave your boxing gloves at home. Don't be argumentative."
>
> "Learn to listen to the other side."
>
> "Monolog is the language of the one who claims to have all the answers."

and from a leading intercultural communication text by Sitaram and Cogsdell (1967):

> "In dealing with members of a different religion, try to understand and respect that religion.
>
> "Make honest attempts to learn the language of (your) audience in preparing to interact with them."

It will be noted that these bromides do show a modicum of awareness of language problems. But they give little or no help toward solutions. If problems of language do indeed comprise a major component in metaphysical communication--and if metaphysical communication comprises a major part of inter-denominational dialog--then a close study of the nature of the linguistic problem should be in order.

In this presentation I shall contend (I) that the roots of linguistic difficulty in metaphysical communication lie in expectations arising from (A) nominal sense and reference, and (B) sentential predication. I shall examine these notions in the light of modern language theory and apply them to the peculiar problem of metaphysical language. Finally, I shall speculate briefly (II) on the possibility of a special metalanguage for metaphysics.

I-A. Sense and Reference

Why should a practical metaphysician be concerned with the question of nominal sense and reference? Why, for that matter, should sense and reference be of interest to anybody except a theoretical linguist or a philosopher of language?

I am going to defer those questions until we've examined the state of current understanding on this complex subject. You must trust me to make the connection later.

The idea of sense and reference concerns the way we use language to draw attention to a portion of reality. This concept is at least as old as Aristotle; but most of our modern study is based on the writings of such philosophers as Frege (1892), Russell (1940), Donnellan (1966), and Lyons (1977). Very simply, this doctrine states

that a linguistic expression used to indicate a part of the world is meaningful in at least two ways: (1) its sense--that is, the image called forth by its utterance, and (2) its reference--that is, the thing or things it is used to indicate. Thus the utterance of the word "cow" must create for users of English a bovine image of some sort (its sense) and at the same time indicate a specific cow or the class of cows (its reference).

Students of speech communication make much the same distinction using the terms "connotation" and "denotation." These terms were first introduced by John Stuart Mill (1843). Their careless and confusing use and misuse in recent years led philosopher Peter Geach (1962) to propose that "so battered and defaced a coin" as denotation be "withdrawn from philosophical currency." The idea of connotation introduces the further complication of cognitive and affective meaning--one which we need not pursue here. Thus I shall continue to make the distinction in terms of sense and reference.

Language scholars have made much of nominal sense during the past century. They have pointed out how the sense of an expression enables us to talk about things that aren't there, such as the unicorn and the French-Austrian border. They have wondered what to do with such utterances as "The present King of France is bald," not wanting to call it false for fear its negation must then be true. And they have disputed at great length over the presence or absence of sense in proper names.

This last question merits attention. Does the name "Helmut Schmidt" have a sense in the same way the name "chair" does? Certainly it does

not: "chair" names a class; "Helmut Schmidt" names an individual. But suppose instead of "Helmut Schmidt" I say "The Chancellor of West Germany"? Surely this expression has sense as well as reference. Yet it refers to an individual, not a class, as in "I want to see the Chancellor." If "The Chancellor" and "Helmut Schmidt" are both proper names, and refer to the same person, how can one have sense and the other not? The answer is that a referring expression like "The Chancellor of West Germany", which in this instance refers to a specific individual, is capable of referring to any of a class of individuals--to anyone who may hold the office at a given time. The fact that "The present King of France" has meaning of sorts, even though its utterance refers to nobody, strikes at the very heart of the difference between sense and reference.

How, then, does all this relate to metaphysical communication? The answer, like so many, lies less in language than in ourselves and our expectations. As users of natural languages we develop expectations much as a child develops teeth. When someone utters a referring expression, sender and receiver alike generate an instantaneous set of expectations. If the expression is "cow," we who use English have a pact that this word shall not appear alone. A single "countable" noun cannot by itself refer. So, knowing what the word means, we wait for more words to learn what the speaker means. For the word "Aristotle" we have a different pact: this word is quite capable of referring by itself. But quite unlike "cow" the word "Aristotle" does not have sense: there is no definition of "Aristotle." Thus when we hear "Aristotle," and recognize that it is a proper name, we

expect it to refer to a specific person without reporting specific attributes. (True, if we have prior acquaintance with the referent, hearing the name may provoke images and identifications. But these are features of experience, not of language.) Even a child, who knows to ask "What is a cow?" would never ask "What is an Aristotle?"

Now let us see what happens when a metaphysical expression is voiced. We hear "God"; our internalized rules tell us that some individual is indicated; and the automatic signal flashes: reference, yes; sense, no. The possibility that "God" might, for some religious denominations, refer to an individual entity and at the same time assert the attributes of that Entity--this possibility contradicts our expectation and is conveyed only at great pain and effort. In short, once we have overcome our own internalized expectation we may say or hear "God" and experience both reference and sense. But when we seek to convey this insight to another, the traditional anticipations which accompany our words confound our meanings.

Lawrence Lapidus (1976) notes essentially this dilemma in his analysis of the religious poetry of George Herbert: "We cannot read these clauses (of Herbert's) without trying to assign subject and object roles to the nouns they contain. . ." And, in more general terms, ". . . to rely on one's own language as a means of approaching God is to guarantee that one will remain earthbound, as far from the desired object as ever." Dilley (1964), using the connotation-denotation distinction, phrases the dilemma this way: "The denotation of 'person' . . . would be confined to human beings if one connotation is specified, or, on more inclusive connotations of that

word, could include angels." And Felkin (1932) warns the lay communicator that "In dealing with a subject so . . . poor in language to express its ultimate facts, it is necessary at times to use expressions which, if they catch the eye of the casual reader, may cause grave misapprehension." Finally, Mary Baker Eddy, in the Christian Science Textbook, Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures (1875), refers to ". . . the hue of spiritual ideas (conveyed through) the meager channel afforded by language. . ."; and again, striking at the heart of the problem of verbalizing the infinite: "Human language can repeat only an infinitesimal part of what really exists."

I-B. Predication

Our expectations regarding names are, to be sure, but a part of the problem. For even if we are able to hurdle the obstacles of natural language and refer directly to a metaphysical reality--even then, how are we to say about it? We must now predicate--say something about--what we have indicated. And predicating, like referring, has the pitfall of expectation.

We have always known--instinctively if not by learning--that the statements we utter are but complexities of a simple subject-predicate structure. That is, we indicate what we predicate. With the advent of Chomsy's (1965) transformational grammar, we now know how to trace even the most complicated statement back to the subject-predicate deep structure that spawned it. The excitement surrounding this linguistic breakthrough may have obscured an important by-product: the re-discovery of that inevitable human expectation which has inhabited and inhibited predication, perhaps since the birth of natural

language. This expectation tells us that the speaker is about to tie two phenomena together--the item or idea referred to and something said to be true of it. And if my world is bound by the physical things I experience, and the relations I perceive among them, then any predication I hear must trip off the expectation of physicality. I look to my senses for verification even before I understand, thus separating myself from any glimpse of the non-physical reality my communicator may have sought to convey.

Some examples: if someone says "John is a fool" we know immediately that something is being predicated of (said about) John. Lyons (1977) notes that this statement ". . . is non-equative. We are not saying of two possibly distinct individuals that they are in fact identical. . ." But replace "a fool" with "my father" and we clearly are equating: "John is my father" says that two identifiable individuals are in fact one and the same. When we hear an utterance of this syntax our expectations tell us to look for a predicate which classifies or identifies--but not both.

Now consider two metaphysical assertions suggested by Lapidus (1976):

I love God

God and I are one

Logic tells us that if A loves B, and B is identical with A, then A loves A, or I love myself. While this may well be true, it is clearly not what was intended by the original pair of statements. Plainly there is a sense of "God and I are one" which doesn't require that God and I be identical. And if we now introduce the assertion "God is

Love," our expectation of property-or-identity-but-not-both is shattered. An abstraction (Love) is apparently being identified with an individual (God). When we hear "God is . . .," our expectations will settle for "The Creator" (identity) or "almighty" (property). But hearing "Love" in that position unsettles us; we must set aside our expectations and learn language anew if we would understand.

From what has been said about sense, reference and predication, one might think that communicating metaphysics in natural language is impossible. This belief is like the scientist who proved that the bumblebee cannot fly. Ludwig Wittgenstein, probably the most avid modern critic of metaphysics, is summarized by Bertrand Russell (1933) as follows:

> More interesting. . . is Mr. Wittgenstein's attitude towards the mystical . . . Everything which is involved in the very idea of the expressiveness of language must remain incapable of being expressed in language, and is, therefore, inexpressible. . . . The right method . . . would be to confine oneself to propositions of the sciences . . . leaving philosophical assertions to the learner, and proving to him, whenever he made them, that they are meaningless.

Russell goes on to say:

> What causes hesitation is the fact that, after all, Mr. Wittgenstein manages to say a good deal about what cannot be said, thus suggesting . . . that there may be some loophole through a hierarchy of languages or by some other exit.

Other metaphysicians--some of whom I have already quoted on this matter--vary in the amount of hope they hold out for natural language as a vehicle for metaphysical utterances. Wilshire (1969) questions rhetorically: ". . . does the subject-predicate form of assertion tell us about a relationship in the world between substances and their

attributes? Lapidus answers: "Both the logical and visible shape of the sentence cripple its power to convey mystical truth." Urban (1939) doubts whether any ". . . empirical argument for God's existence can be formulated which does not presuppose an a priori knowledge of deity." Deetz (1973) finds that viewing language as "representational or as a carrier" makes sense for scientific reporting, but not otherwise. Slote (1967) holds out more hope: "There can be truth without (sentence) convention. . . . But such truth . . . cannot be like the truth of an assertion." And Henle (1951) adds cheerfully, "But . . . however verbally puzzling, there exists no real difficulty. . . ."

Apart from its detractors, metaphysics has been conveyed in natural language throughout recorded history. So strong is the urge to share a precious revelation that the message gets through somehow. We use old words in new ways and combinations to produce new ways of thinking. In languages where the familiar form of second person pronoun is available, we use it to suggest the closeness of Deity. (Warum has Du mich verlassen, mein Gott?) We capitalize pronouns to suggest Oneness. And most of all, we use metaphor, parable and allegory to suggest what we see but cannot describe. The product may be anything from an essay on prescriptive ethics to the Holy Bible.

II. A Metalanguage for Metaphysics?

Given these imposing accomplishments in natural language, it may seem presumptuous to recommend that we develop a new metalanguage for metaphysics. Nevertheless, this is exactly what I recommend. I do so for three reasons. First, the subject matter lies at the very roots of Being: its communication deserves our best effort. Second, though

metaphysics has survived centuries of selfish materialism, and though the Word is even now available to all who seek it, its message is diffused, not enhanced, by natural language. The metaphysical message somehow leaps the chasms of our kaleidoscopic system and reaches the listener in spite of language, not because of it. Third, and by far most important, we now have the knowledge to tell us where and how our natural language goes astray. And I am not willing to let stand the sorry record of our historically feeble attempts to come to grips with reality. For, after three thousand years of accumulated knowledge and sharpened skills we are less capable than ever of the clear direct statement of metaphysical truth.

What is the precedent for a metalanguage for metaphysics? First, a word about the word "metalanguage." I realize this word normally refers to language about language. But I think its original meaning makes it suitable for our purposes: a meta- (beyond-) language for meta- (beyond-) physics.

The most widely studied of such attempts is that of Alfred North Whitehead (1933). Whitehead prepares us by noting how Plato ". . . wrestles with the difficulty of making language express anything beyond the familiarities of daily life." He then outlines his plan:

> I suggest that the development of systematic theology should be accompanied by a critical understanding of the relationship of linguistic expression to our deepest and most persistent intuitions. Language . . . is concerned with the prominent facts . . . . But the prominent facts are the superficial facts. There are other elements in our experience, on the fringe of consciousness, and yet massively qualifying our experience. . . . In respect to such intuitions, language is peculiarly inadequate.

He next proceeds, in 23 sections, to explicate the language of metaphysics, later adding this remarkable comment: ". . . all men enjoy flashes of insight beyond meanings already stabilized in etymology and grammar."

The trouble with Whitehead's treatment is that it is about language instead of providing language. The metalanguage I envision is not for philosophers. It is for you and me. We are the ones who need it. Such a language need not involve a gigantic vocabulary. A handful of new terms will do to start; others may be added as our common experience widens the need. What is crucial is a new syntax: a new way of putting the pieces together. As we have seen, the old order is shot through with expectations based on internalized rules of sense, reference and predication. And though as laymen we may be totally unaware of such rules, we internalize them and follow them just as surely as though we had invented them. With each passing sentence in the old language, the old expectations thrust us further from the very essence we seek. To shake loose of those shackling expectations we require a new language.

Is such a metalanguage practical? In every culture there are counter cultures; and many of these develop their own languages almost overnight. New words, new meanings, new unwritten rules of syntax spread like the dawn as the users fight to shed old values and the old language in which those values are encrusted. Changing language to change thought is as old as recorded time. A new language of metaphysics can be a reality; the need is great and the spirit is willing.

No language can tie us directly to reality. Wilshire's (1969) intuition tells him that "We do not get knowledge of the world into our minds in the same way that we get food into our bodies." Such knowledge reaches us often when we are not expecting, through doors we did not know were there. And when that unexpected, often unsought flash of insight fills our being, we want to find our language ready as we turn with joy to share our precious vision with our fellows.

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